DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

BY ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

50 cents

DOLLARATURE

or

the Drug Store Book

By Ellis Parker Butler

SINCE, as we all know, 'Pigs is Pigs,' Ellis Parker Butler may well wonder whether 'books is books.' Does it matter, for instance, what is between covers or whether the covers are cloth or paper; whether they are displayed with soda fountain sandwich or offered with cigarettes at the tobacconist's?

Mr. Butler has taken a good-natured, but keen, jab at the newest novelty in the publishing trade. Every one who has a personal interest in the situation will wish to aid his digestion of the solid problems which the situation furnishes by taking this very pleasant pill.

DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

BY ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive
Collection
This book may not be taken from the Office
and if borrowed must be returned within

DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

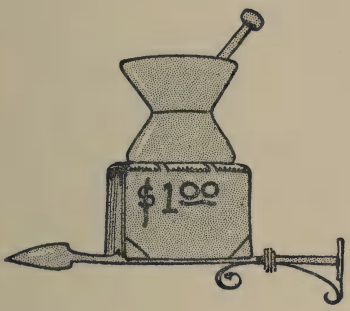
DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

BY

Ellis Parker Butler



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1930

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

DOLLARATURE

or

THE DRUG-STORE BOOK

COTTON was off again yesterday; wheat slumped 1½ cents on prospects of showers in the prairie provinces; Bethlehem Steel was down 2 points; and prime-to-fancy novels were reduced to $1.00 by a number of publishers, to enter the chocolate-sundae field. Lard, we are happy to say, held its own. Unfortunately I do not make lard and I do write books.

You will say: 'Ah! But there you are, you see! They have found you out at last! The books you write are not worth $2.50!' and you will think you have me in a tight corner, but you do not know me. You don't know what an eel I am. You don't

know how easily I can wiggle out of tight corners. If you say to me, 'Your books are worth only $1.00,' I will merely grin at you and say, 'If you ask me, I don't think my books are worth six cents a crate, but what has that to do with the ghosts of William Makepeace Thackeray and William Dean Howells?' I rather think that will stump you for a while.

The dollar-book proposition, as I understand it, is this: Run-of-the-mill novels, all grades, have been book-stored at $2.50 for quite a few years. This has made the novel haughty and insolent, because in the book-stores the novels associate with Sets of Encyclopedias and Full Levant First Editions that cost almost as much as second-hand Ford cars. Although everything possible was done by the department stores in offering these run-of-the-mill novels at funny prices like

$1.98, $2.14, and $2.26, the copyright novel simply would not mend its ways and associate with common citizens in the careless democratic manner of a 10-cent cake of soap, three cakes for a quarter. It remained arrogant, going home only with people with brains of the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades, except in the case of crime mystery novels, which would go home with anybody. Something had to be done about this.

One of the first things to be done was to think of eggs. The thinker who sat down to think about eggs may have intended to think about literature, but you know how a fellow's mind shifts around — a young woman sits down to think about the soul and, the first thing she knows, she is thinking about hats; you sit down to think about the Einstein theory and, the first thing *you* know, you are thinking

about dinner. Perhaps the thinker who sat down to think about literature did so early in the morning, and when he had thought about literature awhile, began to think about breakfast, and that led to eggs.

At any rate, it was inevitable that any one thinking about eggs should see at once that eggs reach the consumer in two ways: 1) by letting the consumer go to the egg-store and buy his eggs; 2) by sending the eggs to the consumer by mail. It was estimated that hundreds of thousands of persons — 657,942, to be exact — would never go to egg-stores to buy eggs because suffering from sore feet or fallen arches. To make sure of their eggs the Egg-of-the-Week System had been created, by which people subscribed for their eggs by the year and the egg producers selected especially fancy eggs and sent an aluminum box of eggs by mail, right to the home, weekly.

But even the application of the Egg-of-the-Week System to the book business did not solve the problem of those who were worried about the proudness of the book. It did not accomplish their desire, which was the worthy one of wishing the book to be so democratic that every citizen would buy one copy of every book published by every publisher. The cruel fact remained that nobody read books except those who read books. Even the Egg-of-the-Week plan, as applied to books, did not put books where chewing-gum is.

For a while the reason for this puzzled every one. Millions of Americans chewed gum; why did not millions of Americans buy books? Books were made with different flavors just as chewing-gum was; they were done up in different styles of packages, with two or three wrappers, and books were advertised just as gum was, every novel

being proclaimed the greatest ever written. What was the matter with books?

It was about this time that some one noticed the Reprint Copyright book. For years these same arrogant first-chop novels that had been sneeringly holding aloof from Mamie-the-Shopgirl, had been jumping into her arms by thousands in the Reprint Copyright editions. These same novels, originally so high-hat and snooty — as we say in the aristocracy — put out originally at $2.50, were being reprinted, after the original publishers had sold all they could and a few more, and sold in great lots at 75 cents or 80 cents or whatever the price might be, in railway station news-stands, general merchandise stores and, what ho! in drug-stores.

Well, it did not take a bright person long to see what that meant! The meaning of that was clear

enough, once the fact was noticed — books had been in the wrong class; for centuries they had been kept in the book-shop class, along with encyclopedias and dictionaries and Sets of Scott — they belonged in the drug and toilet-article class. The book, rightly considered, as a modern merchandise, was not the companion of the $6.00 note-paper and the gold-chased paper-cutter, but the chum of the hair-remover and cough-cure, and the pal of the ice-cream soda and the lettuce sandwich.

The cerebration following this discovery was obvious. If a girl (hereafter called the party of the first part) who operates a typewriting machine (hereafter called the party of the second part) or clerks at Binkers' (hereafter called Binkers') gets hungry at noon and goes to the drug-store lunch counter for a hamburger sandwich and a Strawberry Swizzle, she does not go there be-

cause they cost her what a $2.50 lunch would cost her at the Marmora. She goes there because she is not expected to spend much there. Consequently, if you want to sell a book in a drug-store, it must be a book that costs less. It must be a hamburger sandwich book and a Strawberry Swizzle book; in other words, the dollar book ought to be just about the right ticket.

How the drug-store novel will turn out as a profitable publishing enterprise is none of our business. Some of the publishers are going to try it. They are the hardy pioneers, and whether they will find the drug-store book trade a land flowing with milk and honey, as Moses and Aaron found the Land of Canaan, or, like Peary, find it a North Pole that is mostly frost, no one can tell. Some of the books are to be bound in cloth like any other novels, and some are to be bound in boards, and some,

possibly, in paper covers, thus corresponding with the shaving-soaps, which can be had in cakes, jars, and tubes.

Authors will have nothing to worry about, their royalties being a percentage of the retail selling price. To the author it is all the same whether one of his books is sold at $2.50 by a book-shop or two-and-one-half books are sold at a dollar next counter to the talcum. The publishers hope that three times or four times, or even more times, as many books will be sold. Publishers, I have been told, particularly the more earthly ones, do not like to do business at a loss, and the dollar-book publishers hope the increased sales will keep their net profits neat and tidy, or even make them neater and tidier. They say, 'If you consider the overhead —' But as soon as any one mentions 'overhead' I swim ashore and lie down on my back and

put my feet in the air and whine, because I know I am beyond my depth and already licked, 'overhead' being a higher form of financial mathematical guess-work I never could understand. All I know about 'overhead' is that, no matter how you figure it, your figures are always wrong because you forgot to take into account the Law of Diminishing Returns and the window-cleaner.

In any event, the drug-store dollar book will be an interesting experiment. There is, of course, as some of the more keen observers may have noticed, a slight difference between a toothbrush and a book, even when the toothbrushes have different-colored handles. If I buy a book — and, little as you may be inclined to believe me, I have bought a book — I read the book. While I am reading the book my wife asks me, 'How is your book?' and I say, 'I haven't got very far into it yet.' She says no-

thing more about the book then, but when I have finished reading the book I say, 'I'm through with that book if you want to read it.' 'How is it?' my wife asks me. 'Just so-so,' I tell her, 'but you had better read it. It's not so good, and it's not so bad; it is just another novel; I've read better and I've read worse.'

So my wife reads the book. She sits up an hour later than usual to finish it, and the next morning she says to our daughter, 'Jean, you must read this book; it is the best novel I've read in years.' So Jean reads it, and then Marjorie reads it, and Elsie takes it out to Port Washington and reads it, and I bring it back when she has finished it. Then my wife lends it to Mrs. Biffick, let us say, and Mr. and Mrs. Biffick read it, and the four children of Mr. and Mrs. Biffick read it and lend it to twelve friends, and the book comes back and we lend it to Mrs.

Rimmel, and Mr. and Mrs. Rimmel read it, and the four children of Mr. and Mrs. Rimmel read it and lend it to twelve friends, and when all our friends and their children and children's friends have read it, and all the uncles and aunts and grandmothers and second-cousins of every one concerned, we mail the book to Miss Willup, at Goshen, and it begins another round. Hundreds of people read the book. But hundreds of people don't use my toothbrush. Even if I bought my toothbrushes in book-shops, I would not pass them around for other people to use.

Although you might not notice the resemblance at the first glance, a toothbrush is more like a theater seat than like a book. You buy a theater ticket and you go and sit in the seat it entitles you to sit in, and when the play is over, you can't pass the seat on to your friends for the next night and the following nights. A book can

be passed around, and a book is passed around. If a theater seat is $3.50 — and that is low these days — one person must get $3.50 in entertainment from seeing one play one time. If ten persons read a $2.50 book the entertainment of each person has cost but 25 cents; if fifty persons read the book — and that often happens — the entertainment cost is 5 cents per reader.

That is one reason why I am a little doubtful whether the book can be put into the chewing-gum class by putting it in the drug-store. I don't know how many packages of chewing-gum are chewed each year in the United States. It may be 342 million packages or it may be 97 billion packages, but I do not believe books are going to reach any such sale merely by reducing the price and piling them on the counter next the bath salts. As a rule only one person chews a wad of gum, or takes a pill,

or uses a toothbrush, while so many read the same book that it is often hard to keep hold of it until you have finished it yourself. To be brutally frank — and why not? — one must admit that it is not enough that books are put up in attractive packages like chewing-gum, with chapters instead of sticks, or that books have various flavors just as chewing-gum has; the fact remains that books are *not* chewing-gum — they cannot be surreptitiously stuck on the under side of the seat of the restaurant chair and discarded. Until some one invents a mint-flavored chewable book, or a book that has to be squeezed out of a tube, books will be passed around.

So far all efforts to invent a non-refillable book — so to call it — have been unsuccessful. I remember that when I was a boy a man invented a readable shirt-bosom, consisting of a shirt with a many-ply paper dickey,

or bosom, with a chapter of a novel printed on the under side of each bosom-sheet, so that the wearer could read the next chapter each time he tore off a soiled front, but nothing much came of it. If a man was satisfied with the design of the imitation linen bosom, he did not like the novel, and often the man who wanted a sedate novel had to wear a flashy shirt. Probably the shirt factory had a poor editorial department. The truth was, I imagine, that the literature business and the shirt business were two quite different matters, and possibly the haberdasher was not up in belles-lettres, for that was quite a few years ago, and the objection may not apply to drug-stores to-day. Some of the best lettuce-and-tomato sandwiches are now made in drug-stores, and the selling of a book is no trick at all compared with making a tomato bouillon that does not curdle.

Dollarature

In many ways the drug-store sale of books appeals to the finest commercial instincts of the modern American and should lead to a much needed standardization of product in the literary field and the eventual creation of dependable novels, doing away with the present lack of uniformity.

At the present time the novel may be anything from Hardy to Laura Jean Libby grades, requiring the buyer to have at least a small sense of literary values — or the aid of a bookseller — when buying, let us say, a book to give to Aunt Susan. This makes it annoying. The drug-store, on the other hand, knows its trade and can indicate to the publisher what a novel should be in order to sell to all types of customers, dyspeptic, pulmonary, and rheumatic.

A safe average of book will be produced that will be salable to all,

from the young person who drops in to have a frosted chocolate to the truck-driver who comes in to have a skinned knuckle dabbed with mercurochrome or the commuter who rushes in looking for a rake or a coal-scuttle.

This should relieve the publisher of much of the mental worry he now has in selecting book manuscripts, for he could turn that work over to a committee consisting of the drug-store clerks. I would suggest a committee of five clerks, say the clerk in charge of rubber bathing-caps, the clerk selling cigarettes, the clerk handling elastic stockings, the head soda-fountain clerk, and, possibly, the second assistant pie-cutter. I am not so sure about the pie-cutter, many of them being college graduates and having top-lofty ideas about books; it might be better to substitute the sandwich-maker.

Such a committee would be able

to gauge accurately the reading appetites of the customers and its decisions would prevent the inclusion of anything that would be hard for the truck-driver to understand. In its work, it need hardly be said, this committee would have the assistance of all the clerks in the drug-stores, except the pharmacist. The pharmacist does not amount to much in the modern drug-store, being kept as an ornament, like the blue and red bottled water in the windows, and figured as an unavoidable expense, like the sale of postage stamps. The remaining clerks would have much to say from time to time, as, 'Only 16 per cent of my customers bought books last month; the next lot of novels should appeal more strongly to the users of Hair-Glosso'; or, 'Get more of the John Henry Vispich novels; they are going strong with the humidor and briar pipe trade.'

The committee would, also, be influential in deciding the titles of novels, and would certainly warn the publishers against such titles as *Balisand* and *Backwater* and *Cimarron*. A drug clerk is no person to ask for *Balisand* and *Backwater* and *Cimarron* if you do not want to create a lot of confusion. To go into a drug-store and say 'Have you got Cimarron?' would be certain to bring the reply, 'Perfume counter, over there next to the Put-and-Take tops and the roller skates,' and to ask for *Balisand* would probably send a clerk looking over the proprietary medicines among the Frecknocko and Toefixak, they all have such weird names these days. And I'd like to be standing near you when you ask for *Backwater* in a drug-store. Heaven only knows what you'd get; it might be eau de cologne and it might be arnica.

In time, I am sure, the whole

system will work out beautifully so that those who now dash into the drug-stores and grab three cigars for a quarter, throw down a silver coin and dash out again, will be able to buy their books as briskly. With the splendid systematization that rules in all chain-stores the novels will be piled on the counters in classes, and the hurried purchaser need only glance at the placard that says 'Loves' and grab a book, knowing he is getting a love romance. Other piles will be labeled 'Crimers,' 'Sexers,' 'Westers,' and no doubt the warmer sex novels will be all ready wrapped in plain white paper so that diffident ladies can just whisper a word to the clerk and receive the book without undue blushes.

Outside the drug-stores, pasted on the window, will be the usual announcements 'Specials For To-day,' so valuable in attracting trade:

Dollarature

SPECIALS FOR TO-DAY

Scento Talcum — 3 for 25c
Chocolate Frost — 10c
Frying pans — 22c
Cod Liver Oil, $1.00 size, 68c
Arnold Bennett, $2.50 grade, $1.00
Ham Sandwich, 10c.

The trouble I see is in keeping the dollar novel at a dollar, when it is remembered how reluctant the drug-stores are to keep the 25-cent talcum at 25 cents. Sometimes, when I feel in a despondent mood, I almost believe the reason the drug-stores have had such success with the Reprint Copyright novels is because there is a belief — never, I think, promoted by the Reprint publishers — that a $2.50 novel is being had for 75 cents or 80 cents. The chain-drug-stores do not seem to mind being called 'cut-rate' drug-stores, and I have sometimes felt that they desired people to know that they sold standard articles,

such as talcum, tooth-paste, shaving-soap, and cigarettes, at prices lower than the supposed retail price, and I do wonder how long the dollar novel will remain the dollar novel. It is possible that it will become, in the drug-stores, the 98-cent novel, and then the 86-cent novel, and presently the 80-cent or 75-cent novel. Possibly the chain-stores, with their huge buying capacity, will press the publisher to reduce his price, and, if he cannot see his way to do it, go ahead and make their own novels as some of them, I understand, now make their own 'just as good' preparations in other lines.

Personally I think that when I want to buy a novel for Aunt Susan — or for myself — and the novel costs $2.50 or $3.00 or even the shocking price of a theater ticket, I will buy it. If I am fond of Arnold Bennett's novels — and I am — I

will buy them if they cost $1.00 and I will buy them if they cost $2.50. If the novels of Zybsko Pzmmizk, whose works I detest, sell for 2 cents each, or 2 cents a dozen, I will not buy them.

It seems to me that this attitude will be that of the present large body of buyers of $2.50 books. It will continue to buy the books it wants to read, feeling that a good novel furnishes more solid enjoyment than can be had for $2.50 spent in any other way. If some publisher offers a good novel at $1.00, this same group will buy it, and quite likely buy two more of the dollar books, if the authors they like are among them.

Time will tell just how much need there was for the dollar book and time is needed to tell. The novelty of any new thing or new price sells any article for a while, but in books, in the long run, quality is an important factor. It is true that, in

many cases, readers have bought the books recommended by their booksellers, but I am not so sure that to have a book prescribed by a drugstore sales-girl is quite the same thing. We do say to the clerk, 'I've got an awful cough; what's good for it?' and buy a bottle of Binn's Cough Cure on the clerk's recommendation, and possibly it may be an advantage to be able to say, 'My Aunt Susan has the tonsillitis just awfully bad; what book would you recommend for her?' or to ask, 'Have you a crime mystery story that would be good for a stout man of about forty-five with the liver complaint?' I don't know.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 08816 907 1

THE TRUTH ABOUT PUBLISHING

By Stanley Unwin

Table of Contents

1. The Arrival of Manuscripts
2. 'Casting Off' and Estimating
3. The Price of Books and Over-Production
4. Agreements
5. Production
6. The Actual Selling
7. Book Distribution in Germany
8. Publicity, Etc.
9. Copyright and 'Rights'
10. Other Aspects of the Business
11. Publishing as a Profession

ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

Probably no other American writer combines humor and wisdom in a way that appeals to the man in the street so successfully as Ellis Parker Butler. He is more than a mere funny man; he is a philosophic humorist with an idea back of his joking, and is considered by many as the nearest successor to Mark Twain among contemporary writers.

Mr. Butler, who was born in Muscatine, Iowa, gives the following list of his activities since leaving high school:

Assistant Book-keeper, Muscatine Spice Mills.
Bill Clerk, Muscatine Oatmeal Mills.
Retail Manager Crockery Store, Muscatine.
Bill Clerk and City Salesman, Wholesale Grocery, Muscatine.
Asso. Editor Tailors' Review, New York.
Editor Wall Paper News, New York.
Editor and Part Owner Decorative Furnisher Magazine, New York, six years.
Author, Lecturer and
Vice-President Flushing National Bank.

Mr. Butler is a Past President of the Authors' League of America, and as Chairman of its Executive Committee has guided the League from its infancy to its present sturdy maturity. His books include three fine stories for boys, SWATTY, JIBBY JONES, and JIBBY JONES AND THE ALLIGATOR; two humorous novels, PHILO GUBB, Correspondence School Detective, and IN PAWN, and four wise, amusing, and inspiring volumes of essays: GOAT-FEATHERS, GHOSTS WHAT AIN'T, HOW IT FEELS TO BE FIFTY, and MANY HAPPY RETURNS OF THE DAY.